

Roger Williams University
DOCS@RWU

Featured News Story

The Week at Roger

5-14-2016

Passion, Potential and the Power of 'Yes' – The Class of 2016 Graduates

Public Affairs, Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Passion, Potential and the Power of 'Yes' – The Class of 2016 Graduates

WaterFire Providence Creator Barnaby Evans calls for passion and purpose as 1,045 students earn bachelor's and master's degrees



May 14, 2016 | Public Affairs Staff

Bristol, R.I. – Under sunny skies and the anticipation of new beginnings, 837 undergraduates in the Class of 2016 joined more than 200 adult learners on Saturday, May 14 to culminate their college careers at the University's annual Commencement exercises.

In addition to awarding bachelor's and master's degrees to the candidates in front of a crowd of some 7,000 graduates and attendees, University President Donald J. Farish conferred honorary doctorates to three innovators and local icons whose work over the past three decades has proved critical to the revitalization of Providence from a tired mill town to a vibrant city: WaterFire Providence creator Barnaby Evans; AS220 Artistic Director Umberto 'Bert' Crenca; and architect and planner William Warner (awarded posthumously to his wife, Margaret).

They were selected, Farish said, to commemorate the University's increased footprint in the capital city and impending move to the One Empire Plaza campus, which will extend the reach of a Roger Williams education to a whole new generation of students (many of them working adults).

In delivering the keynote Commencement address, Evans – the award-winning artist whose WaterFire installation has been replicated and written about worldwide – remarked on the honor of holding a degree with the name Roger Williams on it, the University namesake and founder of Rhode Island who “dared to believe in the future” and who “risked his life to assure the freedom that he felt must always accompany the future in Providence, or anywhere.”

“The very first philanthropic act we must do is to make all of our citizens feel like they belong, to feel they have a place and to feel they have a future in our city. And this applies to each of you in this forthcoming Class of 2016. I urge you to see the world before you as a place of bright promise. Be lifelong learners. Continue the tradition you’ve started here at Roger Williams University – your excellent education has only just begun. Be open to the new; make a habit of saying yes; be entirely comfortable with saying ‘I don’t know.’ Know that only you can make a change in this world.”

The world is a rapidly changing place, Evans said, and he called upon the graduates to foster community and inclusivity wherever they may go.

“Take action and demand accountability. David Foster Wallace warned us to the dangers of entrenched irony. I share his concern. Our political world today, both nationally and internationally, is slipping into a nether region of great ambiguity. We need you now more than ever. Value the discipline you’ve learned here at Roger Williams, the example of Roger Williams himself – freedom and tolerance and learning should be your guideposts. Science is a valuable and trustworthy tool to establish real truth. Do not fall for this canard that science is a religion or a politically-motivated sham. It is our most powerful tool to determine the truth. Understand science is a powerful discipline that can lead to truth, but also welcome the arts and the humanities for their capacity to change us, to inform us and to open us up to the world with better understanding.”

In his remarks, Farish noted that the Class of 2016 is the first to have studied all four years under the Affordable Excellence initiative, meaning that for the first time in school history no student incurred a tuition increase during his or her four years. It is also a graduating class that is remarkably prepared for the workforce, he said.

“Increasing numbers of this graduating class each year have had the opportunity to use the theory and principles they learn in the classroom in a meaningful project-based learning experience. These experiences have long been a hallmark of a Roger Williams education, and they include such things as research with faculty, internships or directed study abroad. I will note that 430 of our graduates today have participated in one or more Community Partnerships Center projects during their time here, and that program was still in its pilot stage when they arrived their freshman year.”

The opportunity to test-drive their classroom learning in the real world does not go unnoticed by employers, Farish continued, recalling anecdotes of graduates who are being hired and promoted over Ivy League graduates, and who are lauded by employers for being “exceptionally well prepared.”

These alumni are opening the doors for future Roger Williams graduates, he said, “because they are demonstrating that a Roger Williams education is equal to that of any school in the country.”

Earlier in the ceremony, student speaker Danielle McCullough '16 likened her experience as a student at Roger Williams and studying abroad to the way in which orca whales instinctively form family pods and personal bonds to support each other through life's journey.

“One of the most amazing things about Roger is that we get to learn from peers with many different backgrounds,” said McCullough, who was lauded for her work to create an inclusive and culturally aware campus community. “Not everyone has their parents as their biggest support system, but I did notice that everyone has someone that made this college journey possible for them. No matter who it was, someone either inspired you or pushed you along the way and supported your dreams. This graduation is for them too, the people who have guided us to this point.”

A secondary education and Spanish double major, McCullough also noted that it was her professors' passion for education that inspired her to become an educator. Graduating, she says, comes with a new responsibility.

“Roger has done its best to make us global citizens and we should want that for everyone in our lives. That's the lesson that the orcas teach us. We were lucky enough to have the love, encouragement and support of our pods, and it is our time to encourage others. Whether that's inspiring someone to continue their education, travel the world or pursue a dream that they have, we should support those people in our lives.”

Also during the ceremony, Faculty Senate president and Professor of International Business Minoo Tehrani joined Provost Andrew Workman to present the University's ninth annual Excellence in Teaching Award to Professor of Finance Michael Melton of the Mario J. Gabelli School of Business. Melton, who also serves as director of the Center for Advanced Financial Education (CAFE) at Roger Williams – an experiential learning opportunity for a select group of finance students who manage a \$100,000 investment portfolio over an academic year – reminded the graduates of how proud the faculty is of their past, present and future achievements.

“As I tell my students, nothing makes me prouder than to see them succeed in life after graduation,” Melton said. “No matter what you choose to do after this day, like become a marine biologist, a journalist, an engineer, or even a private wealth manager, my advice is always the same: not knowing everything *isn't* a bad thing. As long as you show up and work hard, all of you will be successful.”

The entire graduating Class of 2016 totaled 1,045, with 88 graduate students earning master's degrees and 120 students graduating from the School of Continuing Studies. Among the 837 undergraduate day students in the class, half of the five most populous majors included architecture, marketing, psychology, finance and management. And in what has become an annual tradition, 14 students took home President's Core Values Medallions in recognition of their academic, professional and community-based accomplishments.

One day earlier, 87 students earned *juris doctor* degrees in an [RWU Law ceremony](#), highlighted by an address by U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez, who as former attorney general for civil rights at the U.S. Department of Justice and director of the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has pioneered efforts to create a living wage for workers and to protect workers' retirement savings.

"Civil rights remain the unfinished business of America," Perez said. "You have a remarkable opportunity here to make sure you are relevant in dealing with the defining issues of our time. For too many, opportunity remains elusive, and you can be part of the expansion of that opportunity."

[ACADEMICS](#) [ALUMNI](#) [LIFE @ RWU](#)